1 **Network analysis of gut microbiota literature: an overview of the research landscape in non-human**

2 **animal studies**

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4 **Running title: Animal gut microbiota**

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27   **Abstract**

28   A wealth of human studies have demonstrated the importance of gut microbiota to health. Research on non-

29   human animal gut microbiota is now increasing, but what insight does it provide? We reviewed 650

30   publications from this burgeoning field (2009-2016) and determined that animals driving this research were

31   predominantly domestic   (48.2%), followed by model   (37.5%), with least studies on wild   (14.3%)

32   animals. Domestic studies largely experimentally perturbed microbiota   (81.8%) and studied mammals

33   (47.9%), often to improve animal productivity. Perturbation was also frequently applied to model animals

34   (87.7%), mainly mammals (88.1%), for forward translation of outcomes to human health. In contrast, wild

35   animals largely characterised natural, unperturbed microbiota (79.6%), particularly in pest or pathogen

36   vectoring insects (42.5%). We used network analyses to compare the research foci of each animal group:

37   diet was the main focus in all three, but to different ends: to enhance animal production (domestic), to study

38   non-infectious diseases (model), or to understand microbiota composition (wild). Network metrics quantified

39   model animal studies as the most interdisciplinary, while wild animals incorporated the fewest disciplines.

40   Overall, animal studies, especially model and domestic, cover a broad array of research. Wild animals,

41   however, are the least investigated, but offer under-exploited opportunities to study real-life microbiota.

42

43   **Key-words** microbial ecology, microbiodiversity, microbiome, network theory, wildlife

The dawn of modern microbiota research

Technological advances in multi- omic platforms such as metataxonomics and metagenomics, have helped

fuel the recent expansion of microbiota research (Marchesi and Ravel, 2015), especially on humans, as

exemplified by large-scale efforts such as The Human Microbiome Project, started in 2007 (Peterson *et al.*,

2009). Research on microbiota from non-human habitats has followed: in 2010 the Earth Microbiome Project

(www.earthmicrobiome.org) was initiated to document microbial diversity across multiple biomes (Gilbert *et*

al., 2014). Studies focusing on microbiota of the gut have especially captivated scientific interest; it is the

most dense and diverse microbial community of the body, is influenced by a range of intrinsic and extrinsic

variables including diet, genetics and environmental factors (Khachatryan *et al.*, 2008; Phillips,   2009;

Claesson *et al.*, 2012; Bright and Bulgheresi, 2010), and is vital to health and development (Round and

Mazmanian, 2009; Lozupone *et al.*, 2012). In recent years non-human animal gut microbiota studies have

started to appear, for example, characterising the microbiota of giant pandas, *Ailuropoda melanoleuca*, to

make microbial comparisons across age groups (Tun *et al.*, 2014), or of the European honey bee, *Apis*

mellifera, to understand the role of bacteria in nutrition (Engel *et al.*, 2012). But, what other species have

been studied, and why? Given this field is burgeoning, it is timely to take stock of the non-human animal gut

microbiota literature and examine the research landscape thus far.

Here, we ask what drives research in animal gut microbiota? by quantifying the subject of each study as a

domestic, model or wild animal. Within these three animal groups we determine whether data collection is

purely observational or instead, the result of experimentation; which animal taxa are used, and which

research questions are addressed. In addition, we use network analyses to determine unique and overlapping

research foci for each animal group. Finally, we determine the extent that animal groups consider microbiota-

host-environment interactions, by calculating the interdisciplinarity of studies within each group.

Data-mining the literature

A search for peer-reviewed articles on non-human gut microbiota published between the years 1911 and

2016 was performed in Web of ScienceÆ and PubMed. Search terms were microbi* AND gut OR other

gut-related terms (anal OR anus OR caec* OR cec* OR cloac* OR colon OR duoden* OR faec*

72 OR fec* OR gastro* OR ile* OR intest* OR jejun* OR rect* OR rum* OR stomach). The search

73 excluded common irrelevant terms (ferment* , microbiol* , reactor* , review* , vitro), and those

74 related to humans (child* , human* , infan* , men , paedi* , patient*). All abstracts of the resulting 3

75 095 articles were reviewed manually and 1 419 were found to characterise the microbiota of the non-human

76 animal gut (either the entire digestive tract, one or more sections, and/or faeces). A sub-set of 650 studies

77 (November 2009   July 2016) were randomly selected for analysis based on corresponding randomly

78 generated numbers from all studies (Figure 1, Supplementary Information 1). Firstly, we categorised each

79 study as focussing on animal species that were: domestic   (livestock and companion animals), model

80 (studied to provide insight into the microbiota of other organisms), or wild   (free-living or undomesticated

81 animal species studied in their natural habitat or captivity). For each publication we noted whether data were

82   observational , i.e., purely descriptive, or the result of a perturbation , i.e., a treatment was applied, such as

83 a probiotic. We categorised the focal taxon for each study as mammal, bird, fish, reptile, amphibian, insect or

84 non-insect invertebrate. Finally,   36 broad lines of enquiry   (research questions) were identified and

85 quantified within each of the three animal groups (Figure 1, Supplementary Information 1).

86

87 <Figure 1 here>

88

89 **What is driving animal microbiota studies?**

90 The 650 publications reviewed here were dominated by studies on domestic animals (48.2%) followed by

91 model animals (37.5%), while wild animal studies were comparatively few (14.3%; Table 1). Perturbation is

92 crucial to understand how a system functions, as exemplified by classic ecological experiments (Paine,

93 1966), and we found that it was used heavily, as opposed to observational data, in domestic studies (81.1%;

94 Table 1). Likewise, perturbation was frequent in model studies (87.7%), but was rarely used in wild animals

95 (20.4%), where instead observational data (79.6%) were favoured. All of the reviewed studies focussed on

96 the bacterial communities of the microbiota, and of these, 12.5% studies also characterised at least one other

97 microbial community: archaea (8.8%), fungi (4.3%), protozoa (2.8%) and/or viruses (0.6%; Supplementary

98 Information   1). Just over half   (54.3%) of studies that investigated the non-bacterial microbiota used

99   perturbation, the remaining half being observational; in addition, about half investigated domestic animals

100   (53.1%), followed by wild (32.1%) and model (14.8%) organisms.

101

102   In domestic animals, perturbation was used with the aim of improving animal productivity (29.7%), for

103   example by administering probiotics (16.3%, e.g., Ahmed *et al.*, 2014) or prebiotics (6.4%, e.g., Hoseinifar *et*

104   *al.*, 2014; Figure 2A). In model animals perturbation was used to determine interactions between gut

105   microbiota and host health, e.g., the role of microbiota in eliciting an immune response (immunity ; 36.6%;

106   e.g., Brinkman *et al.*, 2011) for forward translation to humans. For model animals, perturbation also included

107   therapeutics, such as antibiotics (13.5%; e.g., Carvalho *et al.*, 2012), and more rarely, organ transplants

108   (1.2%; Li *et al.*, 2011) and other surgical procedures (0.8%; Devine *et al.*, 2013, Figure 2B). The few wild

109   animal studies to use perturbation did so to understand system functions, e.g., by examining the effect of

110   dietary treatments on microbiota of wild-caught giraffes, *Giraffa camelopardalis*, as a means to understand

111   microbial symbioses (Roggenbuck *et al.*, 2014). Instead, observational data were the norm for wild animals

112   in order to characterise natural microbiota structure and function, especially community composition

113   (41.9%; Figure 2C).

114

115   Although perturbation, under controlled conditions, is more straightforward in domestic and model animals,

116   thus facilitating treatment comparisons and reducing confounding factors such as genetic variation and diet,

117   the complex combination of factors that influence microbiota are unlikely to be understood by looking at

118   laboratory animals alone (McGuire *et al.*, 2008; Amato, 2013). Standardisation may appear logical to obtain

119   less noisy data, but it does not reflect the human condition, where such identical factors are not experienced

120   throughout life nor between individuals, and risks, what Ronald Fisher stated as   *(supplying) direct*

121   *information only in respect of the narrow range of conditions achieved by standardisation*   (Fisher, 1937). It

122   would appear that wild animals could provide an opportunity not only to examine natural gut microbiota

123   function, but to extend observations to incorporate understanding of complex multidirectional microbiota-

124   host-environment interactions that they are subject to. Already, other areas of traditionally animal-model

125   dominated research, such as immunology, study and sometimes perturb wild model systems, giving rise to

126   wild immunology (Pedersen and Babayan, 2011), and it could be timely for microbiota research to follow

127   suit. Consequently, the obvious progression of wild studies is to understand how natural microbiota

128   responds to perturbation as a model for humans and other species, and to determine directionality of

129   microbiota-host-environment interactions (Gordon, 2012). However, difficulties in doing so may be imposed

130   by legislation relating to scientific procedures on wild animals in any given country. In the UK, for example,

131   the Animals Scientific Procedures Act 1986, must be complied with under Home Office regulations. In

132   addition, species may be afforded protection from perturbation due to their international conservation status,

133   for example, those appearing on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) red list.

134   Movement of samples between collaborators working on protected species may also be complex due to

135   Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) regulations; and permits are required for

136   the translocation of samples from given species between countries. In a compromise between studying wild

137   animals and meeting legal and logistical requirements, 40.9% of wild studies examined here used wild-

138   caught (captured for purposes of study) or captive wild animals (e.g., from a zoo or research facility), with

139   the remaining 59.1% investigating free-living, or a combination of free-living and captive animals. Even this

140   level of compromise may significantly alter research outcomes, as it has consistently been found that wild

141   animals exhibit a loss of natural microbes following captivity (Xenoulis *et al.*, 2010; Nelson *et al.*, 2013;

142   Kohl and Dearing, 2014).

143

144   <Table 1 here>

145   <Figure 2A-2C here>

146

147   **How taxonomically diverse are animal microbiota studies?**

148   Domestic and model studies were composed of similar taxonomic groups (predominantly vertebrates, i.e.

149   mammals, birds and fish, in 97.1% and 93.0% of studies respectively), but the opposite was true of wild

150   studies, which predominantly focussed on invertebrates (52.2%; Figure 3). Domestic animals that have large

151   farmed populations in economically developed regions were most studied; i.e., pigs, cattle (49.7% and 28.7%

152   of mammals respectively), and chickens (80.5% of birds; Figure   3). Species from all six taxonomic

153   categories have been exploited as models, but model studies mostly focused on laboratory mice (70.2%

154 mammals) or rats (23.3% mammals; Figure 3), in part because the dominant bacterial phyla in the rodent and

155 human gut are similar - *Firmicutes*, *Bacteroidetes* and *Actinobacteria* (Spor *et al.*, 2011).

156

157 Laboratory model rodent studies have been fundamental for progressing our understanding of microbiota

158 function and modulation, for example rats have demonstrated microbiota may be used as a biomarker to

159 predict liver transplant rejection (Ren *et al.*, 2013). However, extrapolating data from laboratory animals to

160 other species (including humans) has limitations, e.g., similarities in microbiota between rodents and humans

161 are reduced beyond the phyla level (Spor *et al.*, 2011; Nguyen *et al.*, 2015). In addition, laboratory animals

162 have a highly inbred genetic background (Hufeldt *et al.*, 2010), and are exposed to very different conditions

163 to those experienced by humans and wild animals, but which influence microbiota, e.g., captive rearing

164 (Zeng *et al.*, 2012), and constant extrinsic factors such as diet and housing conditions (Le Floc h *et al.*,

165 2014). Indeed, the disparity between laboratory animals and humans is believed to be a major contributing

166 factor towards attrition , whereby drug trials are successful in laboratory animals but later fail in human

167 trials (Garner, 2014), and this same lack of successful forward translation is also likely to occur in microbiota

168 research. As such, there appears to be a niche for utilising wild rodents as model organisms, which are

169 physiologically and genetically similar to those already used and understood in the laboratory (Pedersen and

170 Babayan, 2011), but host an intact and diverse gut microbiota (Amato, 2013). However, microbiota studies

171 on wild mammals are currently relatively uncommon (30.6%) and include species not related to those

172 traditionally used as model organisms e.g., arctic ground squirrels (*Urocitellus parryii*) have been studied to

173 monitor temporal changes in microbiota composition (Stevenson *et al.*, 2014). Instead, wild studies focussed

174 on insects (42.5%), and although wild insects such as *Drosophila,* whose simple microbiota has provided

175 insight into host-microbe interactions, could be developed as a model system (Chandler *et al.*, 2011), studies

176 were instead driven by the potential for microbiota manipulation to be used in biocontrol. As such, wild

177 insect studies were mainly focussed on agricultural pests and vectors of pathogens e.g., bee (23.4%), termite

178 (22.1%) and mosquito species (13.0%; Figure 3). These, and similar studies, have suggested that removal of

179 important symbiotic bacteria responsible for lignocellulose digestion could be used to control crop pests

180 (Schloss *et al.*, 2006), and probiotics may be used to control vector-borne pathogens such as *Plasmodium*

181   (malaria) in mosquitoes, since bacteria can stimulate an up-regulation of immunity genes that reduce

182   *Plasmodium* acquisition (Dong *et al.*, 2009; BoissiËre *et al.*, 2012).

183

184   <Figure 3 here>

185

186   **Using network analyses to visualise and quantify the research landscape**

187   To visualise research foci and interdisciplinarity, network graphs were constructed for domestic, model and

188   wild animal studies based on research questions. A network graph consists of nodes linked by edges; in this

189   case, a node represented one of the 36 research questions identified, and the edges the co-occurrence of those

190   questions within a scientific paper(s). Each network was constructed from an n by n symmetrical adjacency

191   matrix; composed of a corresponding row and column for every node, where entries indicated links between

192   two nodes (i, j). Edges were non-directed, i.e., a link between the nodes i, j had the same value as j, i. Node

193   size (s) was weighted according to the total number of studies addressing that question, and edge width was

194   weighted by the number of studies in which the two research questions co-occurred (Figure 2A-C).

195

196   **What are the research foci of animal microbiota?**

197   To quantify and compare the foci of research questions between animal groups, we calculated a series of

198   network metrics. Node size (s), or the number of studies investigating any given question depicts how

199   common a question is; node degree (k) represents the number of edges connected to a question, thus its

200   importance in forging links between disciplines; and node strength (NS) is the sum of weighted connections

201   to a question, hence how core the question is to the research.

202

203   Diet was consistently a question of focus in all three animal groups (Table 1), but its research associations

204   differed. In domestic animals Diet was most commonly studied (s=158), created the most links to other

205   questions (k=20) and did so frequently (NS=175, Table 1). Thus, diet was fundamental and at the core of this

206   research; often as a means to manipulate animal health via the microbiota, particularly to increase animal

207   production (38.0% domestic diet studies; Figure 2A). Diet was also most frequently studied in model

208   animals (s=95), but with respect to host health and disease: 34.7% of such studies used diet specifically to

8

209   treat or simulate non-infectious diseases such as obesity (Esposito et al., 2015) and diabetes (Prajapati *et al.*,

210   2015; Figure 2B). Despite its popularity diet was not the most integrated or interdisciplinary question in the

211   network, but immunity was (k=23 and *NS*=164; Table 1), highlighting the importance of the shared

212   relationship between microbiota and immunity, and how it consequently affects many other aspects of health

213   (Round and Mazmanian 2009). In contrast community composition was most studied (k=13) and embedded

214   (*NS*=41) within wild studies, but diet was key to creating research links between questions (s=39, Table 1).

215   This link results from the fact that wild studies focus on microbiota structure (e.g., Delsuc et al. 2014), and

216   suggests we are currently acquiring more basal knowledge on wild animal microbiota. In addition, only

217   25.9% of wild animal diet studies used perturbations, with the remaining 74.1% observing microbiota

218   composition under a natural diet (33.3%; Figure 2C). Given that 72% of emerging zoonotic pathogens are

219   transmitted to humans from wildlife   (Jones et al.   2008), and microbiota and immunity are strongly

220   interlinked (Round and Mazmanian 2009), determining how microbiota interacts with host immunity and/or

221   infectious disease (currently only 17.9% and 9.3% in domestic animals which have frequent contact with

222   humans, and 3.2% and 10.8% of wild studies, respectively) deserves further consideration.

223

224   **Do animal microbiota studies take an interdisciplinary approach?**

225   Animal microbiota studies with a single research focus have provided important basal knowledge on

226   microbial composition and function e.g., in-depth analyses of microbiota community composition in

227   laboratory mice has revealed that the intestinal crypts, which harbour gut stem cells, also accommodate a

228   niche microbial community (PÈdron *et al.*, 2012). Likewise, there is also great value in an interdisciplinary

229   approach in which multiple factors are studied simultaneously, and can aid in progressing knowledge and

230   teasing apart complex and multidirectional host-microbiota-environment interactions (Gordon, 2012). We

231   quantified the interdisciplinarity of each group by measuring the mean betweenness centrality   (*BC*) of

232   each network: *BC* indicates how closely associated all questions are in relation to each other, and is the

233   number of shortest paths required to pass through each question to connect it to all other questions; larger

234   values indicate questions are more closely associated (Leydesdorff, 2007). Network density (*D*), indicates the

235   level at which interdisciplinarity has been exploited in each group, calculated as a proportion of the total

236   number of possible connections, whereby 0 = no connections present and 1 = all possible connections are

237 present and maximum interdisciplinarity has been reached. Network analyses were conducted using the

238 igraph package in R v. i386 3.0.3 (Csardi and Nepusz, 2006).

239

240 Model studies exploited the an interdisciplinary approach the most, with the highest proportion of possible

241 links between questions (D=0.23), followed by domestic (D=0.17) and wild (D=0.08) studies (Table 1). In

242 addition, research questions in model studies were more closely associated, directly or indirectly, with one

243 another, (mean BC=19.09 ±3.99), than in domestic (BC=15.99 ±3.41) or wild (BC=12.19 ±3.41) studies

244 (Table 1). The comparatively high interdisciplinarity of model studies reflects the large range of questions

245 addressed (N=34), compared to the domestic (N=27) and wild (N=22) groups, and the motivation of many

246 model studies to improve medical treatments which often requires an interdisciplinary approach to monitor

247 the range of subsequent effects on health (e.g., to investigate the associations between organ transplantation,

248 non-infectious disease, immunity and microbiota; Xie *et al.*, 2014). Conversely, wild studies were the least

249 integrated and interdisciplinary, and more questions were addressed independently of one another. However,

250 this group did address a unique research question: phylogeny and how phylogeny is driven across species

251 by gut microbiota and diet, and *vice versa*; for example, myrmecophagous mammals from different

252 evolutionary lineages exhibit striking convergence with respect to gut microbial composition, driven by

253 dietary adaptations (Delsuc *et al.*, 2014).

254

255 While the more focussed approach of wild animal research has allowed us to assemble fundamental

256 microbiota knowledge, it has been argued that an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to progress research

257 on basic and applied gut microbiota (Gordon, 2012). We predict that the interdisciplinarity of wild animal

258 studies will increase as they are adopted in microbiota research, particularly if done so as model organisms.

259 Indeed the first interdisciplinary microbiota studies using wild populations provide interesting insight into

260 the interactions between host, microbiota and environment. For example, parasitic helminths infecting the

261 gut have up- and down-stream effects on microbiota composition (Kreisinger *et al.*, 2015; Maurice *et al.*,

262 2015) and seasonal variation in wild rodent microbiota is largely driven by changes in food availability

263 (Maurice *et al.*, 2015).

264

Conclusion and outlooks

Although more than 10% of studies investigated the microbial community of non-bacterial species in addition to the bacterial component of the microbiota, of these only 0.6% studies investigated the virome, despite evidence that viruses bestow a number of functional traits to bacteria (Ogilvie and Jones, 2015). Complementary studies that simultaneously investigate multiple components of the gut biome are likely to shed light on microbiota composition and functionality (see for example, Glendinning *et al.*, 2014). We demonstrate that most animal gut microbiota studies are driven by economic (domestic animals) or human health (model animals) issues, although more microbiota studies on immunity and/or infectious disease in domestic animals could benefit both livestock and humans in close proximity to them. There are, however, well-founded concerns regarding the limitations of laboratory animals as model organisms, as highlighted by attrition (Fisher, 1937; Garner, 2014). In 2013 the former director of the NIH, Prof. Elias Zerhouni, stated that *We have moved away from studying human disease in humans* (NIH Record: http://bit.ly/2f5UpII), arguing that we should *.refocus and adapt new methodologies for use in humans to understand disease biology in humans* ; raising interesting issues about the use of animal models, including in microbiota research, and whether it is scientifically legitimate to forward translate our findings to humans. This does not mean that we should not use animal models, but rather that we should consider changing the way in which we study them, so that they may more accurately represent human inter-individuality. The intact gut biomes of wild species that experience inter-individual and environmental variation more similar to humans than their laboratory counterparts, rendering the results more realistic , could form the basis of more relevant models to study microbiota. However, field experiments would need to be carefully designed to provide statistical power in the face of extensive variation (e.g., controlling for genetic background, diet, sex, etc.). Under some circumstances, manipulation of microbiota in wildlife is not possible (e.g., for rare, elusive or protected species). In these cases, development of mathematical and/or statistical models to assign directionality to observational data could be beneficial. Examples of applications in other fields include, identifying interactions between immune components using network theory (Thakar *et al.*, 2012), and determining interspecific interactions among an unperturbed community of gut parasites, using generalised linear mixed models (Fenton *et al.*, 2010). Studies on wild animals are currently comparatively few, and

292 generally aim to characterise natural microbiota, combining few disciplines. However, we expect

293 interdisciplinarity to increase in wild animals should they be developed as model systems.

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295 Supplementary information is available at ISME Journal s website.

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Figure legends

305   **Figure 1:** Work flow for categorising gut microbiota studies on non-human animals following searches in

306   Web of ScienceÆ and PubMed. Of the 1 419 relevant articles identified, 650 recently published studies

307   (2009-2016) were categorised into one of three animal groups (domestic, model or wild animals). Data

308   collection method, animal taxon and research question(s) addressed were determined for each study.

309

310   **Table 1:** The number of studies categorised into three animal study groups: domestic, model or wild, from

311   650 non-human animal gut microbiota studies, showing data collection methods   (observation or

312   perturbation) and network indices of three network graphs investigating research question interdisciplinarity

313   and overlap.

314

315   **Figure 2A-C:** Network graphs illustrating the frequency of   36 research questions addressed by gut

316   microbiota studies on a) domestic b) model and c) wild animals, and how frequently these questions co-occur

317   within the 650 studies. Each node (circle) represents a research question, with diameter weighted by the

318   number of studies. Edges (lines) connecting each node represent the co-occurrence of different research

319   questions, with width weighted by the total number of co-occurrences.

320

321   **Figure 3:** The percentage of gut microbiota studies within three animal groups: domestic (black), model

322   (grey) or wild (white), investigating different animal taxa. For each animal group the combined percentage of

323   studies across all taxa equates to 100% of studies for that group.
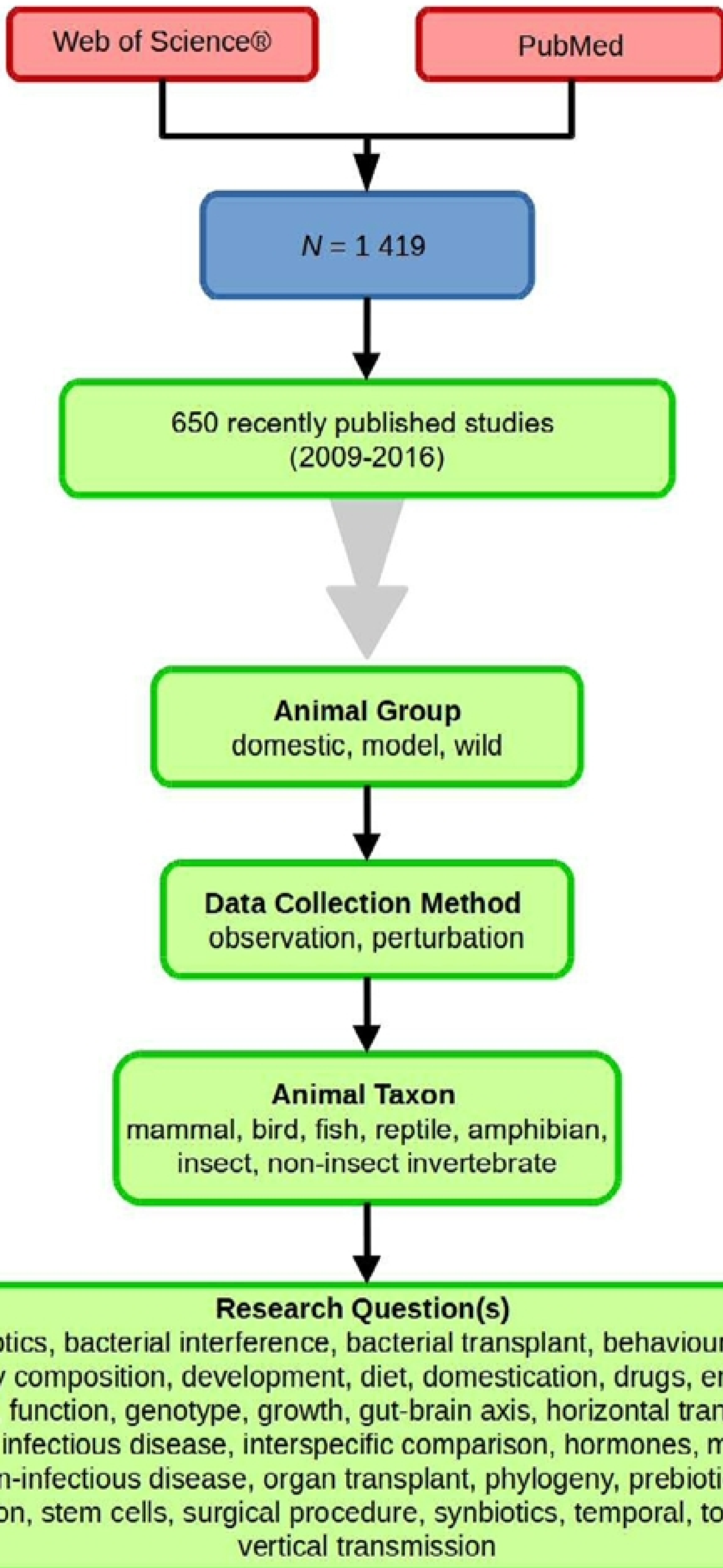
FIGURE 1

Table 1

Animal group	Data collection method		Number of nodes (N)	Maximum node size (s)	Maximum node degree* (k)	Maximum node strength (NS)	Network densityß (D)	Mean betweenness centrality§ (± SEM) (BC)
	Perturbation	Observation						
Domestic (48.2%)	256 (81.8%)	57 (18.2%)	27	Diet (158)	Diet (20)	Diet (175)	0.17	15.99 (±3.41)
Model (37.5%)	214 (87.7%)	30 (12.3%)	34	Diet (95)	Immunity (23)	Immunity (164)	0.23	19.09 (±3.99)
Wild (14.3%)	19 (20.4%)	74 (79.6%)	22	Community composition (39)	Diet (13)	Community composition (41)	0.08	12.19 (±3.41)

Node degree (k): The number of edges connected to a node, i.e. the number of research questions that co-occur.

Node strength (NS): The sum of the weighted edges connected to a node, i.e. the total number of separate co-occurrences of a research question and all others that it is connected to.

ßNetwork density (D): The connections present in a network as a proportion of the total number of possible connections.

§Mean betweenness centrality (BC): The mean shortest number of paths required to pass through each research question in the network, i.e. how well connected research questions are and thus interdisciplinarity of the whole network.
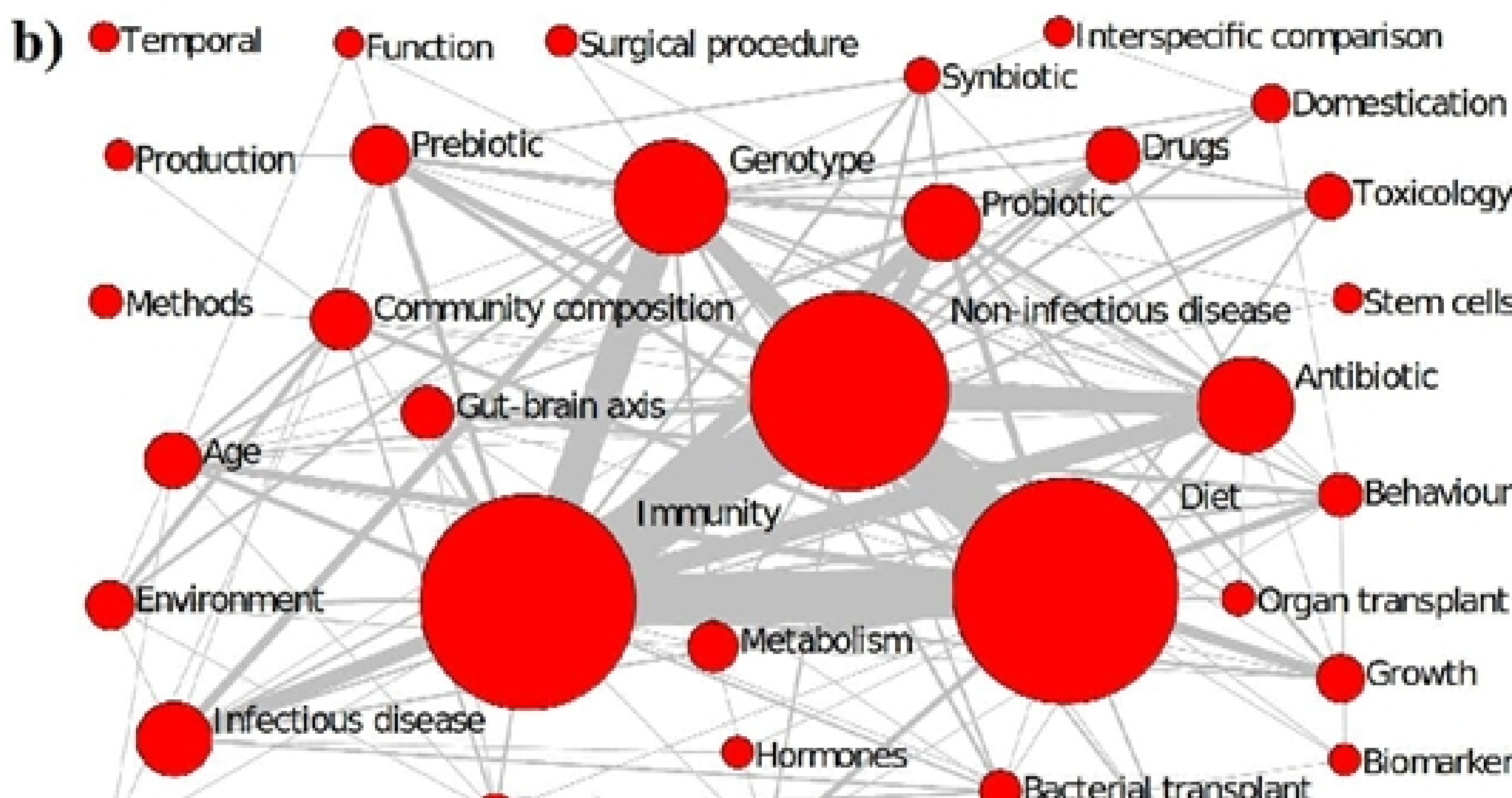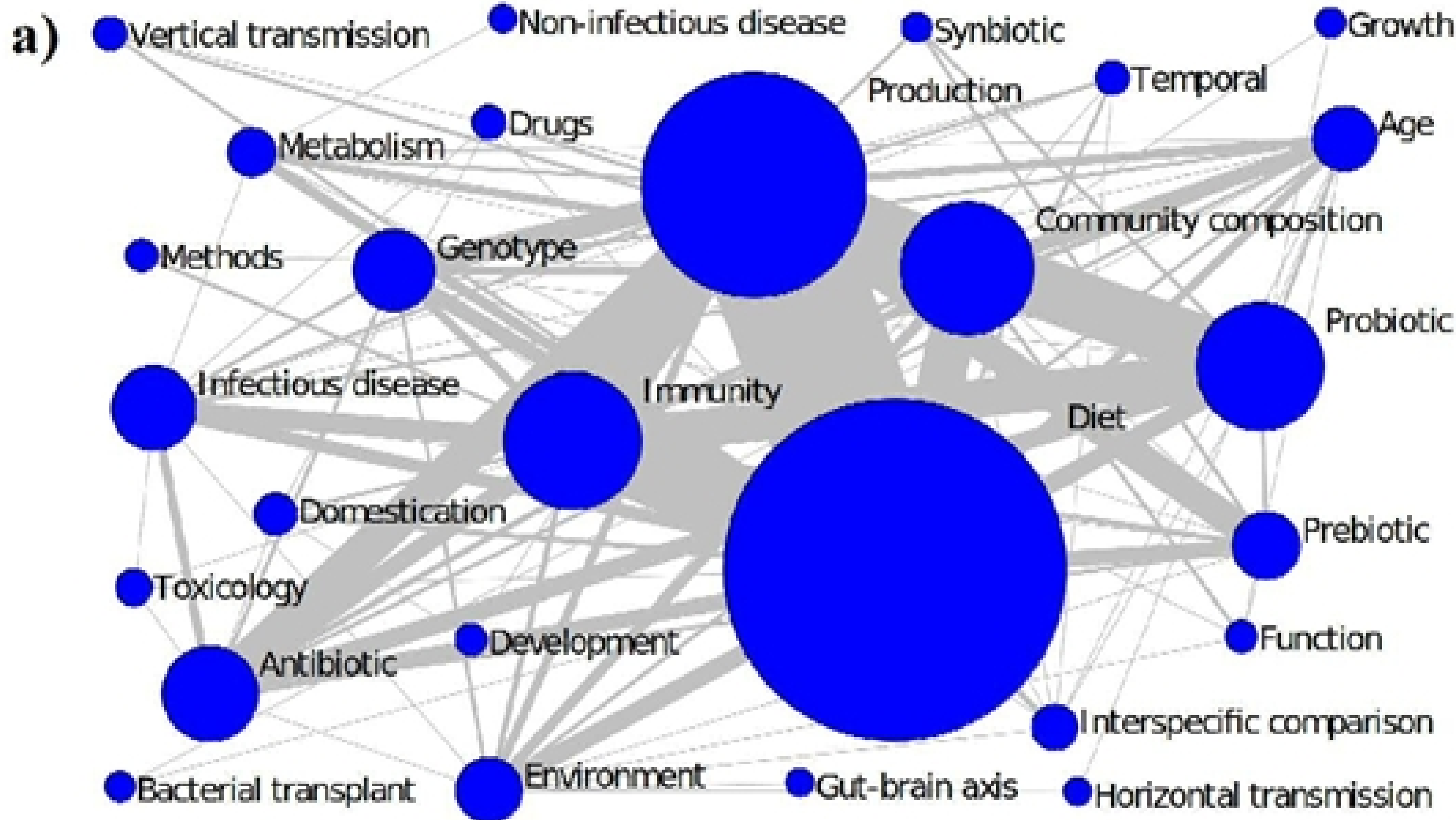
FIGURE 2A-C

Figure 3